THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

DOES GOD CARE?
September 26, 1999

John M. Buchanan

I've experienced moments of sustained calm awareness that subsequent questioning has never discounted. Those moments, which recurred at unpredictable and widely spaced intervals still seem to me undeniable manifestations of the Creator's benign, or patiently watchful, interest in stretches of my life . . . There've been no shows of light, no gleaming, illusory messengers, almost no words; and the music that underlies each moment is silent but felt in every cell like a grander pulse than my own . . . If I were not nervous, in the prescribed modern fashion, I'd call such experiences revelations . . . I've come to suspect that, far from being the exclusive experience of saints and mystics, many more perfectly normal human beings than we can easily imagine share such dawnings and keep them secret in some desire to avoid the appearance of lunacy.

Reynolds Price
Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?

FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Job 42: 1-6
Luke 13: 1-5

"Has God forgotten to be gracious?"
Psalm 77:9

Dear God, we come here because we need a reminder that you are; that you are mysteriously present in the midst of this perplexing world of ours; a reminder that you know and care about what happens in the world and that you know and care about us. So speak that reminder to us in this time together. Startle us once again with your truth, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Does God care?

There is a charming story about Paul Tillich, the great 20th century existential theologian, whose thought and writing and speaking could be a little difficult, to say the least. He said, for instance, that "God does not exist—God is the essence of existence." And he said, "God is not a being—God is being as such, the Ground of all being." And "Faith," is "ultimate concern." After a particularly strenuous lecture a man stood up to ask a question. He said, "Professor Tillich, I appreciated your remarks and I think I understand that faith is ultimate concern. That's very interesting. But what I really want to know is do you think the ultimate is concerned about me?" That's the question, isn't it? Does God care?

Or, to put it slightly differently, if there is a God who cares, why do innocent people suffer?

What about those Egyptian babies who died at the first Passover or the Egyptian soldiers who drowned as Israel escaped at the Red Sea? Or much more immediately, and much closer to home—the dear ones, the friends who are victims of random accidents, tragedies, because they were at the wrong place at the wrong time; or the dreaded diagnosis, out of the blue, following a routine exam—"its malignant;" or loss of job, a dream, a hope; or loss of a child or a parent, or visiting the U.S. Holocaust Museum; and the inevitable questions: "Why has this happened? Why him? Why her? Why me? Why has God done this, or allowed this? Does God care?"

Reynolds Price is a distinguished American writer of novels, essays, poetry and literary criticism, who teaches at Duke University. Price is a believer: he's not certain about the church but he does very clearly identify with Christian faith. He describes his own religious credentials in a delightful way: Methodist mother, Baptist father, aunts and uncles scattered among the Presbyterians, Episcopalians as well. He remembers Sunday

afternoons on his North Carolina porch, and the relatives "enjoying an occasional volley on the 'superiority of total immersion over the few sprinkled drips of a christening.'" He remembers "My father's maiden aunt Belle, relished reminding her Episcopalian nieces that their church was founded by Henry VIII, while her own Baptist church was, of course, founded by Jesus and named for his cousin, John.'" (*A Letter to a Man in the Fire: Does God Exist and Does He Care?* p.46)

At the very height of his literary career, Reynolds Price was diagnosed with cancer of the spinal cord. He endured a long period of surgery, extremely painful treatment, which was nearly fatal itself; lost the use of his legs, but survived. He wrote a wonderful book about it, *A Whole New Life* and resumed his academic and literary career.

Two years ago he received a letter from a young medical student, Jim Fox, who himself had recently been diagnosed with a particularly virulent form of cancer. Fox had read Price's memoir and his letter posed a very fundamental question: "Does God Exist and Does He Care?" Fox wrote:

> "I want to believe in a God who cares because I may meet him sooner than I expected. I think I am at the point where I can accept the existence of a God (otherwise I can't explain the origin of the universe), but I can't yet believe he cares about us." (p.25)

Price not only believes God exists—but also that God has something to do with his survival.

> "The means of my survival worked outward from a sense of God's awareness of my ordeal and his willingness to watch and brace me, generally in deep silence, in my own fierce will to live." (p.24)

But there is still the theological problem of innocent suffering. Why, if there is a good and powerful God presiding over things, do innocent people get cancer? Price never tries to answer the basic question. Rather he asserts that there are times when God seems to be absent and silent. He writes:

> "Few believers known to me have survived to midlife without the sense of occasional or frequent, desertions by God, or absences of his interest or—hardest of all—his intentional silences. (p.36)

He believes, with Julian of Norwich and T. S. Eliot that, in the end, "All shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

He counsels his young correspondent to remember the mystery of God, that we will not have all the answers.

> "If forced to speculate, I'd have to say that the mind in the ultimate pith of things is benign . . .that you're bound toward a goodness you can't avoid . . . ." (p.83)

The Bible itself wrestles with the issue of suffering and God's relationship to it and does not dismiss it. The Psalmist asked "Has God forgotten to be gracious?" The Bible does not provide simple solutions, but deals with human questions, nowhere more vigorously or honestly than the Book of Job. Job loses everything he has and comes to God, perplexed, confused, wounded and angry. He is a good man, a faithful, honest and just man—why has this happened? Three friends try to console him and express the conventional wisdom of the day. He must have done something wrong, there is some behavioral or character flaw which brought all this tragedy. But Job knows he's innocent and confronts God head on—"I'm innocent," he says, "why are you doing this to me?"

The conclusion of the book is magnificent. God finally responds "out of the whirlwind," by asking Job where he was when God was creating the world? "Who is this who is asking these questions?" God asks. And Job, finally acknowledging that there is mystery here he does not comprehend, that there is not going to be a simple, viable answer, finally says, "I had heard about God, but now—in this mystery of not knowing—I see God." It's a remarkable conclusion.

The question comes up several times in the New Testament. One day friends of Jesus pose the question. There had been a public political protest by some Galileans. The government had tracked them down, caught up with them in the Temple at worship and murdered them on the spot. Not long after, a construction accident at Siloam had resulted in the death of 18 workers. Why had it happened? Again, the best thinking of the day was that bad things happen to bad people. Someone must have sinned—either the victims or their families. On another occasion, his disciples asked whether a man, blind from birth, had sinned or was it his parents?

Jesus, in the passage from Luke, warns his disciples that sometimes sin does produce suffering, but in both instances rejects the conventional wisdom that suffering is always the result of human sin.

We know better than that. And the notion that somehow God punishes children for something their parents did is simply unthinkable.

Does God Care? That's the question. That's what Jim Fox wanted to know. It is what we want to know.

To have suffered at all—to have participated in the suffering of someone you love or care about—to stand at the bedside of a child struggling with leukemia—is to ask the question, Dear God, are you there and do you care?

Nicholas Wolterstorff, who teaches philosophy at Yale, lost a son in a mountain climbing accident and wrote a fine book afterward, *Lament for a Son.*

"I cannot put it all together," Wolterstorff writes.

> "To the most agonized question I ever asked I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would let him fall. I do not know why God would watch me wounded. I cannot even guess. I can only, with Job, endure." (p.67-68)

Conventional wisdom in the form of things we think or say to one another is that: sin causes suffering: we, or whomever is suffering, must deserve it, must have done something to bring it on. And sometimes we seem to believe that God sends us suffering to test or refine us.

There is, I now conclude, a bit of truth in those sentiments; not all the truth, just a bit.

Some behavior results in suffering. It may not be sinful in terms of evil, but there is, sometimes, a cause and effect relationship. In an ironic twist, the pietistic Christianity many of us bridled against and ultimately rejected, focused on negative moralisms which seemed to be trivial: no smoking, no drinking, no dancing, no card playing, no movies. The Methodists even used to include abstinence from tobacco in ordination vows. How we pipe and cigarette smoking, sophisticated Presbyterians used to love tweaking our covertly puffing and inhaling Methodist colleagues. But you know, the Methodists were dead right. I've lost two parents because of respiratory illness—both heavy smokers. The evidence is now overwhelming—smoke and you will, in all probability suffer and die prematurely. And the continuation of the tobacco industry's freedom to addict our children, to enjoy government subsidies for their addictive and lethal product, to hire the brightest and best advertising and public relations experts to deny that they knew what they knew about tobacco's addictive and lethal characteristics, and chose instead to use any means at their disposal to addict our children, is as eloquent an example of corporate, political and economic sin as there is. The medical and social cost of smoking are almost incalculable. If our companies are successful in their marketing focus on Third World children, particularly Chinese, it will be an economic disaster of gargantuan proportions for which we will pay for decades to come. The Methodists were right.

Pollute the environment and pay the price.

Engage in gluttony, get a stomach ache.

Capture native people, import and sell them, enslave them for several centuries, then deny full citizenship and continue to subject them to racism—and pay for it. Thomas Jefferson, slave owner, struggled with the concept of slavery and said, prophetically, "I tremble for my nation when I consider that God is just."

Some sin results in suffering. But not all suffering is attributable to sin.

Some suffering does test, refine, and make us stronger and better. I don't believe that's the purpose or that God causes suffering for our own good, but sometimes that's what happens. Reynolds Price wrote to Jim Fox:

If you survive this ordeal in working condition, you're almost certain to be a far more valuable medical doctor and person . . .down the road you'll face your own severely ill patients with a candor and sympathy that cannot be faked." (p.64)

Presbyterian theologian Robert McAfee Brown, wrote a letter to his newborn granddaughter fighting for her life against critical kidney disease:

> "Dear MacKenzie, In your young life you've already accomplished a lot. You have widened the circle of love. Your mother's students have donated blood. One even volunteered his kidney. There are things we do not understand, but within which we live. Here is one: what has happened to you is bad, and yet good has come of it. Instead of making us bitter, suffering can make us tender, and help us to focus on others who are going through comparable experiences." (*The Christian Century,* 3/2/94)

One thing we must never say is that suffering is God's will. Sometimes we do say it, in an effort to be comforting, or at least to come up with an answer. But, no, the God of love, who creates all things, whose breath is the spirit of life, who looks at creation and says "that's good" and at human life and says, "that is very good," does not will the suffering and death of any one of God's creatures.

In a new book, *For the Time Being,* Annie Dillard tackles the issue in her unique and irreverent style and says:

> "The Newtonian God is dead—that tasking and antiquated figure who haunts children, who sits on the throne of judgment frowning and forgiving, who with the strength of his arm, dishes out human fates in the form of cancer or cash to 5.9 billion people . . .God is no more blinding people with glaucoma or testing them with diabetes . . . than he is seeding tumor cells or fiddling with chromosomes . . . .The very least likely things for which God might be responsible are what insurers call acts of God." (p.165-166)

So "is God out of the loop?" Annie Dillard asks. And the best any of us can do is confess what it is we believe.

Here is what I believe.

God values freedom—human freedom and freedom operating in nature. So accidents happen, random events happen: magnificent and terrible: Mozart and Hitler, gorgeous sunsets and deadly tornadoes, world class athletes and children with special challenges. Accidents happen: jet engines fail, cells malfunction. There is no celestial choreographer making it all happen. Rather there is a loving creator who values freedom.

Parents know a little bit about that. Parents want children to grow strong and autonomous and independent and that means freedom: freedom even when it scares you, freedom even when everything in you wants to protect and shield and not expose your precious child to risk. But to operate like that would deny them the opportunity to be: never go swimming, never cross the street, never ride a bike, never out of sight. But good parenting, loving parenting, is essentially, limiting our power to determine and decide and allowing freedom. To love is to accept the risks of freedom.

And that is what I believe about God and creation.

I believe God cares passionately. As a Christian, I believe that is what Jesus Christ is all about: God's passionate love for creation and for each one of us.

That, I believe, is what we mean when we say we believe Jesus Christ is God incarnate; that is how God came among us, and identified with us, even to the point of suffering and death.

When Reynolds Price was in the very depths of his physical and emotional pain, he had a dream that he was up to his knees in the sea of Galilee and Jesus was there and Jesus washed his cancerous legs. And he tells about an 87 year old writer friend of his who told him recently about her own similar dream. She was facing exhausting and painful tests before surgery. She was afraid and dreaded everything about the experience—

> **"I went out along the Galilee hills and came to a crowd gathered around a man, and I stood on the outskirts intending to listen. But he looked over the crowd at me and said, 'what do you want?' I said, 'Could you send someone to come with me and help me stand up after these tests, because I can't manage alone?' He thought for a moment and then said, 'How would it be if I came?" (p.30-31)**

That is the good news. In Jesus Christ God has come.

God cares deeply.

God comes to be with us in ways we do not always see clearly or understand at all.

It's like something 4 year old Rachel does. Rachel, among other things, copes wonderfully with a bit of a challenge. At bed time, when she and her parents say prayers, she folds her hands and her mother or father folds their adult hands around her small ones. Rachel went to preschool last week. And the teacher told her mother that when it came time to pray before lunch and she asked the children to close their eyes and fold their hands, Rachel got up out of her seat and walked to her holding out her folded hands for the teacher to wrap her hands around them.

Our inability to understand doesn't change what I believe is the most fundamental reality—God's sustaining presence, God's comforting compassion, God's empowering love which is with us, always, world without end.

Amen.